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large-scale dome symbolising a borderless and transnational universe, peace in cyprus was demarcated by a line drawn on a map that would indicate two sides of a country. the so-called green line, drawn by major-general peter young using a green chinagraph pencil and partially in effect since 1963 due to the outbreak of intercommunal violence, became an indispensable feature, if not the status quo, of the island’s landscape from 1974 onwards, forming the un buffer zone.

unlike the dome’s utopian symbolism and somewhat problematic socio-political imagery of ‘world unity,’ the green line mirrored, perhaps the complex reality of what stands before us in shaping the world. in a world full of drawn lines that act as borders, raise walls, and cultivate perplexed human relationships, the very act of drawing inescapably orders and regulates people on ‘how to live together.’ echoing roland barthes concept of ‘idiorrhhythmy’¹³ where ‘together’ recognises and adhere to the distinct, but still present, rhythms of the ‘other,’ the microcosm of cyprus projects ‘togetherness’ as the coexistence of simultaneous and multiple nested narratives and realities, where one side does not recognise the existence of the other, yet each remains incomplete in reminiscing or envisioning a different other ‘whole’.

on the one hand, nowadays it has become increasingly attainable to be a ‘world citizen;’ intrinsically interconnected to each other through communication technologies that radically untethered the constraints of physical distance, more so when the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 forced planes to touch the ground and isolated everyone within the confines of one’s home. while physically in one place, the ‘world citizen’ today can be virtually everywhere and present in more than two places at once, looking through lines, borders, and walls via screens. at the same time, physical presence, still prevails legal, socio-political, and financial protocols and contracts, with nation states raising tighter measures in controlling mobility, relentlessly increasing the number of virtually non-existent ‘citizens’ that remain ‘stateless;’ either as refugees or members of self-proclaimed nations, unofficially or illegally recognised by the ‘official’ global community. in the midst of them all, cyprus—a dot in the mediterranean—is currently witnessing them all, reminding us that no matter how small a place can be, ‘together,’ whether it is mutual or enforced, is inevitable.

like actors in the stage of the world, we ‘think no more of the audience than if it had never existed. imagine a huge wall across the front of the stage, separating you from the audience, and behave exactly as if the curtain had never risen’¹⁴. while, however, denis diderot when wrote that in 1758 was referring to the projection of a fourth, imaginary wall in a three-walled theatre to distance the actor from the audience, fuller was inspired to use the geometry of the circle for the development of the geodesic dome because of his childhood blindness. paralleling his blurry vision with a psychedelic effect, fuller described how lights and colours were projected in a way that allowed him to understand patterns of triangulation that are otherwise unavailable to people of regular vision.¹⁵ sometimes, breaking that fourth wall might feel futile; it is after all inherent in human’s nature to form boundaries. however, there is always the option to look through that wall in the same manner fuller embraced his blurry vision; a friction that enabled his intuitive, and creative mind to invent.

daydreaming of ping-pong publics – the rhythms, sociality & play around a table

jan van duppen

ping pong, ping, pong, piiiing, ping, pong, po, pin, pong, pin, poooong. the rhythms of the bat hitting the ping pong ball, hitting the table, hitting the other player’s bat, and again the table, and the bat, and so on and so forth. the rhythms of this game sound staccato, they suddenly speed up, abruptly end with a volley or a ball hitting the net, then the batting and bouncing starts again. repetition and difference.



fig. 1 desk with the blood orange’s (2013) album ‘cupid deluxe’, ping pong bats and ball, and hayahisa tomiyasu (2018) photobook ‘ttp’

it is march 2021 as i am writing this text in london; and like many others, i feel drained from living through the third lock-down since the covid crisis began a year ago. sitting behind my desk, i’m listening to the song you’re not good enough by blood orange (2013) and whilst the guitar riff stops; footage from a bar is mixed in. i am hearing the sounds of a ping pong game being played, jazz music in the background, people chatting and someone shouting after a point has been scored. it makes me daydream of playing a game myself, it awakens a longing for being part of the kind of sociality that can be heard at the end of the song. as the excess death figures keep on rising it may feel wrong and actually slightly perverse to start thinking about a space full of strangers gathered around a table tennis table, playing, watching, joking, bumping into each other, exchanging gossip, arguing, simply enjoying an evening together. yet, it is all the more important to remind ourselves what it means to be alive, to evoke the excessive joy

that can be experienced in relating to others, a joy that is located in the playful practice itself, in the doing, and is less concerned with achieving predictable and commercial outcomes. this text reflects on several instances of publics being constituted around table tennis tables in different social-spatial settings by making use of personal memory, ethnographic observation, and a photobook. whilst looking forward to a pandemic reconfigured world, i hope that my dwellings on daydreams of ping pong publics spark us to relearn how to relate to others in the city and recuperate a sense of play in our daily environments.

on my pre-pandemic daily route to the local supermarket, i used to pass by two table tennis tables situated in the large entrance hallway of the art school central saint martins. currently, due to the pandemic, all these tables have been removed[1]. during the weekends, a diverse group of players, mixed in both age and ethnicity, hanged out at these two tables. they dragged chairs along, brought food and non-alcoholic drinks, and played ping pong into the evening. crowded around the table were spectators watching the ongoing game and waiting for their turn to play as well. amongst the group, one table tennis player stood out. she played the game in earnest with her partner. she was there every week, sweaty arm pits and richly filled lunch boxes. i also noticed that some regulars had started moving one of the tables into the corner at the entrance of the building. in that particular corner of the hallway, there is stronger artificial light, so the games could continue for longer in the evening. what is more, the ping poll ball when overhit or missed by one of the players does not travel into the endless void of the hallway, but bounces back on either the brick wall or the glass wall. thus, these amateur players had appropriated these table tennis facilities, they had taken ‘ownership’ of this highly securitised and carefully managed space. after some months, i felt i had gotten to know this group of regular ping pong players intimately. my favourite familiar strangers are now missing in the pandemic urban landscape.

strictly speaking the two table tennis tables were situated in a private space as the single landowner of this vast redevelopment just north of king’s cross station is ‘king’s cross central limited partnership’ (2021b). the developer’s website states ‘table tennis is the thing - get your game on at king’s cross’ and continues by saying ‘formerly the preserve of bored teens in youth clubs, table tennis couldn’t be hotter in the capital right now’ (2021a). in other words, the ping pong tables can be read as part of the developer’s efforts to bring ‘fun’ into the newly developed area, seeking to maximise profit from a large-scale office, retail and housing development by alluding to the idea of the ‘creative city’. king’s cross is a turbo charged redevelopment of a post-industrial landscape, in which once utilised warehouses got abandoned, were then temporarily used as clubs, and are now turned into a fashionable shopping arcade. whilst celebrating its edgy past as funky clubbing district by displaying large photographs of dancing clubbers (see figure 2), it deliberately leaves out its local history of drug addiction, prostitution and homelessness, and its current 24-hour surveillance by a large team of security guards ensures a safe and sanitised play landscape. this area aims to accommodate the ‘tech creatives’ of google, facebook and closely aligned companies, and the art school forms a crucial part in the machinery of this creative city

district. the introduction of the ping pong tables in the csm hallway, then, are not too dissimilar to how tech companies such as google infuse play into the work of ‘googlers’, by including pianos, pool tables and ping pong tables into the working environment and disciplining workers to allocate 1/5 of their working time as they themselves see fit (kavanagh 2011, 348–49). in doing so, play is put to work, it becomes a driver of economic profit, and the times and space of work and play become increasingly indistinguishable. to riff on the slogan ‘shop where i danced’, king’s cross offers its visitors spaces to ‘work where i played’.



fig. 2 ‘shop where i danced’ wall poster at king’s cross coal drop yard shopping complex, london

however, this particular group of regular table tennis players escaped the developer's logic of a commercial productive play landscape. despite the table tennis tables' commercial setting and the developer's careful management of the area, my observations suggest that these players carved out a space to just have a game of ping pong, to simply enjoy the game for what it is. although one could argue that by using the tables these regulars fulfil the goals of the private developer by creating a buzz, producing a fun 'public' space, this interpretation does not fully capture what happens on the ground. first of all, most of these ping pong players do not wear the avant-garde clothing of the csm fashion students, nor do they correspond to the stereotypical creative tech workers appearance, instead this is a different public, these players seem to be ordinary londoners using the space available to them. secondly, these players do not just play one game of ping pong, but rather spend the whole afternoon and evening around these tables. the ping pong players' duration[2] and focused occupation of the space contrasts sharply to the other more transient users of the king's cross area. thirdly, the ping pong players sweat, shout, argue, and chew on their food, and thereby produce a distinct fleshy liveliness in this otherwise empty space. thus, these ordinary londoners' distinct ping pong practices challenge the deliberate playfulness of this area. their serious play pushes the spatial, temporal and affective boundaries of the king's cross redevelopment, as evidenced by the developer's efforts to contain their play by reducing the number of tables from four to two.

furthermore, the king's cross ping pong player's enact a social atmosphere that does not confirm to the idea of a 'networked sociality' that stahl (2008, 313) describes so well in his article on the round-the-table ping pong country club events in berlin. at these club nights, a heady mix of local artists and entrepreneurs mingle, listen to country music, and whilst playing the sociable ping pong game they invest themselves in the promise of furthering their precarious careers by extending their professional network and perhaps even acquiring new commissions in the middle of the night. this blurring of the distinctions between play and work does not seem to correspond to what occurs amongst the king's cross ping pong players. the latter's sociality appears not to be informed by a desire to become part of an artistic scene in london, nor is this an explicit site for them to acquire new business contacts whilst having 'fun'. in contract, their sociality is more focused on the game itself, on the joy of playing together. the king's cross' ping pong players effortlessly inhabit the contradictions of the 'inner street', as the hallway is named by the developers, they negotiate the simultaneity of being inside and outside, privately owned yet publicly accessible, supervised 24 hours yet the wider public is invited to play for free at the tables. in doing so, the wider city seeps into the sanitised redeveloped space of king's cross.

as i am not entirely immune to the lures of the redeveloped king's cross, i stumbled across the photobook ttp by photographer hayahisa tomiyasu (2018) in one of the new shops. this book transported me to a public park in leipzig and introduced me to entirely different set of rhythms and play around a table tennis table. ttp stands for 'tischtennisplatte' (table tennis table) and whilst flicking through the photobook the reader comes across a wide variety of appropriations of this one table tennis table. you can see people sit, lounge, read a book, take selfies in

the middle of the night, sunbath, perform a downward dog, all those activities on top of the table tennis table. also, you can observe dogs and birds dwelling around the table, as well as large groups of children gathering to conduct school exercises. the table also becomes part of an elaborate tent construction to host a party in the park and is turned into a desk to fix a kite. lastly, all sorts of ball games are performed on this table tennis table in a park in leipzig, yet, and this is the pun of the book, in 260 pages, not once people play a game of ping pong. for five years long, tomiyasu observed the rhythms of social life around the table by taking photographs from an identical angle from a window in his flat[3], and he deliberately omits the actual game of ping pong. i understand this as a provocation to be attentive towards the daily and seasonal rhythms of use of public spaces as well as a recognition of the ingenuity of people to appropriate, redeploy, play with such a simple thing as a table tennis table.

as the successive lockdowns have deskilled us in having fun together, shrunk the times and spaces to encounter others and negotiate difference, blood orange's song, the observations of the king's cross' ping pong players, and tomiyasu photobook, can hopefully help us to remind ourselves what it can be like to socialise around a table, to play with others. whilst navigating the challenges of the pandemic, we can transport ourselves through engaging with cultural artefacts, sharing of personal memories, and recalling spatial practices to relearn how to inhabit our cities playfully.

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table turning

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an ‘earthwork’ learning centre/a challenge to transparency: upon an architectural object in nicosia

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- daydreaming of ping-pong publics
1. there used to be four tables, as indicated on the king’s cross’ website (king’s cross central limited partnership 2021a). the on-line mapping platform ‘pingengland’ (2021) states that there are three tables. yet, i can only remember seeing just two tables in the space. thus, from 4 to 3 to 2 tables to none whatsoever, where is the fun in that?
 2. there might be an even longer history to the practicing of the game of table tennis in the king’s cross area. the artist richard wentworth included several ping pong tables in his exhibition ‘an area of outstanding unnatural beauty’, which responded to the upcoming changes to the area in 2002. wentworth did this as he had a ‘sense that this had once been a popular activity for locals and was no longer available’ (battista et al. 2005, 460).
 3. the photobook resonates with henri lefebvre’s ‘rhythmanalysis’ (2004), in which he argues that in order to grasp the fleeting rhythms of the street one needs ‘to situate oneself simultaneously inside and outside’ and posits the balcony or alternatively a window as doing the job admirably for the rhythm analyst (lefebvre 2004, 27–28). as a social scientist, i appreciate the rigour tomiyasu’ applies in his observation and documentation. his photography allows one to see certain patterns develop as well as highlighting differences, which is very much like the social science method of a ‘shooting script’ as introduced by suchar (1997), and which i rework in my recent research on urban gardens (van duppen 2020).
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- k. spread the secret
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